

Marines FROM THE TRENCHES

In this edition, *Marines* singles out individuals who continue to add to the treasure trove of Marine Corps lore and history. Among them is a sergeant who wouldn't let the loss of a leg end a dream, a lieutenant colonel who sees retirement not as the ending of a career but the chance to start a new mission. The warrant officer who became mayor and the corporal who became a citizen before shipping out to Iraq have stories to tell. These are just a few of the countless stories Marines stateside and deployed have to share.

'One Less Ankle to Break' Wounded OEF Marine makes historic jump

By Cpl. Isaac Pacheco, FORT BENNING ARMY BASE, Ga.

> Lt. Col. Kirk Rice, commanding officer of Marine Detachment Fort Benning, pins on Sgt. Christopher Chandler's hard-earned jump wings during the drop zone graduation ceremony.

Photo by Lance Cpl. Kevin J. Ridlon

High above the eastern Alabama countryside, more than 20 service members sit back-to-back in a C-130 Hercules. The deafening roar of the aircraft's engines drowns out nearly every other sound.

In the dim interior light, the jump instructor can see only a few of the trainee's taut, weathered faces. They feel ready. After all, this is why they've trained for the past three weeks.

Like the rest, Sgt. Christopher Chandler, an Aurora, Colo., native, is focused on the task at hand. But unlike the rest, Chandler faces a little more of a challenge. He's making a jump with only one good leg. The other was blown off below the knee when he stepped on a land mine Dec. 16, 2001, while providing security for an explosives ordnance disposal unit in Kandahar, Afghanistan. He was among the first service members injured in the Global War on Terrorism, and he refuses to let



the accident diminish his resolve.

The service members get to their feet at the instructor's signal.

The plane makes a steep left turn and lights flash on above the open doors on

each side of the fuselage. One minute to go. A wave of glove-covered hands reaches upward for the yellow static lines. The front man in the line turns and shouts commands over his shoulder through the

rushing air, "Chalk 5, all clear!"

"Chalk 5, all clear!" the instructor echoes.

The lights above the doors flash green. The instructor, who has remained fairly passive up to this point, explodes.

"Get out! Go, go, go!" he bellows as he pushes each body out of the plane.

As each jumper touches the sky, his pack springs to life releasing a life-saving parachute.

Behind the plane, a trail of giant green blossoms floats gracefully to the ground.

What would otherwise be just another successful day on the job for the U.S. Army Basic Airborne Course students turns into a historic day, as Chandler jumped into the history books and became the only service member retained on active duty to graduate the course with a prosthetic leg.

It's been said that the truest test of one's character is not what he does with success but what he makes of defeat. For generations, the Marine Corps has bred recruits with this type of bravado and instilled the courage in its warriors to move forward when those around them have faltered. In keeping with this ethos, Chandler stepped up to the challenge of jump school in the face of seemingly impossible odds.

"I think any obstacle in life can be overcome if you believe in yourself," Chandler exclaimed. "I hope this will make it easier for other people with prosthetics who want to go through (jump school) next time. As long as they won't be extra baggage, and they can pull their own weight and accomplish the mission. Hopefully, they won't have to put up with as much as I had to."

Chandler not only rose to the challenge but also exceeded even his own expectations when he was selected as the class' noncommissioned officer honor graduate.

"He captures the heart and soul of what it means to be a U.S. Marine," said Lt. Col. Kirk Rice, commander, Marine Corps Detachment, Fort Benning. "I mean he exemplifies all of our core values—honor, courage and commitment. This is a courageous young man. He fought to be retained on active duty and asked for a chance to come to airborne school as a re-enlistment bonus."

Chandler, a maintenance technician for Headquarters Company, Marine Forces Atlantic, faced many challenges and trials during the course of his air-

borne training revolution, but none so rigorous as the medical boards he faced to stay on active duty.

"After his injury and the loss of his leg, Chandler had to go before a Naval review," Rice explained. "They had to make a decision as to whether he should be retained on active duty. He was able to demonstrate to the Physical Evaluation Review Board that he was fit for return to full duty with no limitations. I think his success will open the door for the retention of service members who have lost a limb. It clearly demonstrates that given certain conditions, they can and should be left on active duty."



▲ Chandler displays the prosthetic limb that enables him to remain as active as any other Marine.

Photo by Lance Cpl. Kevin J. Ridlon

Chandler had to undergo another battery of physicals, paperwork and interviews before the airborne school would accept him. Yet, he was able to keep his sense of humor throughout the ordeal.

"Obviously, the school was going to ask questions because they were concerned about my safety and the safety of the other students," Chandler said. "They wanted to know if I was even capable of completing the tasks they had for me. I figured I had an advantage. After all, I have one less ankle to break. Running

everywhere was the hardest part for me. I don't really like to run. The other guys in my class really motivated me to keep going."

One classmate said Chandler's motivation came from within and spread to the people around him.

"I was in Kandahar with him when he had his accident, and this is the first time I've seen him since then," said Sgt. Ryan Scheucher, platoon sergeant, 2nd Intelligence Battalion, II Marine Expeditionary Force. "If you'd known him before the accident, what he's doing right now would come as no surprise. Both in uniform and out, he's always just been one of those guys who just shuts up and gets the job done. If anything, since his accident I see a little more fire in his eyes. He gets up and he goes. He doesn't do anything to skyline himself or to showboat. If it's in the scope of his duty he just does it."

Chandler's enthusiasm and tireless commitment inspired many of his classmates and set the standard for them to follow.

"The first time I even realized he had a prosthetic leg was during one of our (physical training) sessions, and he was just smoking these little 18 year olds out there," said Air Force Staff Sgt. Brian Mayer, Special Operations Command Fort Bragg, N.C. "He's an inspiration because you have all these perfectly healthy people who wash out and quit while he stays in and makes it. That's a real testament to his character."

Other jump school students credited Chandler with helping them make it through the course when they were struggling.

"He motivated me because at first I felt kind of down and I didn't like the course because it was so hard, but then I saw that he was doing it with only one leg and that inspired me and let me know that I could do this," said Army Sgt. Fatima Hickman, Company B, 203rd Infantry, 4th Support Bn., here. "He could have done anything else but he chose to continue in the military and to go forth with what he wants to do. He's not letting his prosthetic leg stop him from being the Marine he wants to be."

And what did Chandler have to say to his detractors; to the people who said an amputee would never make it through the school.

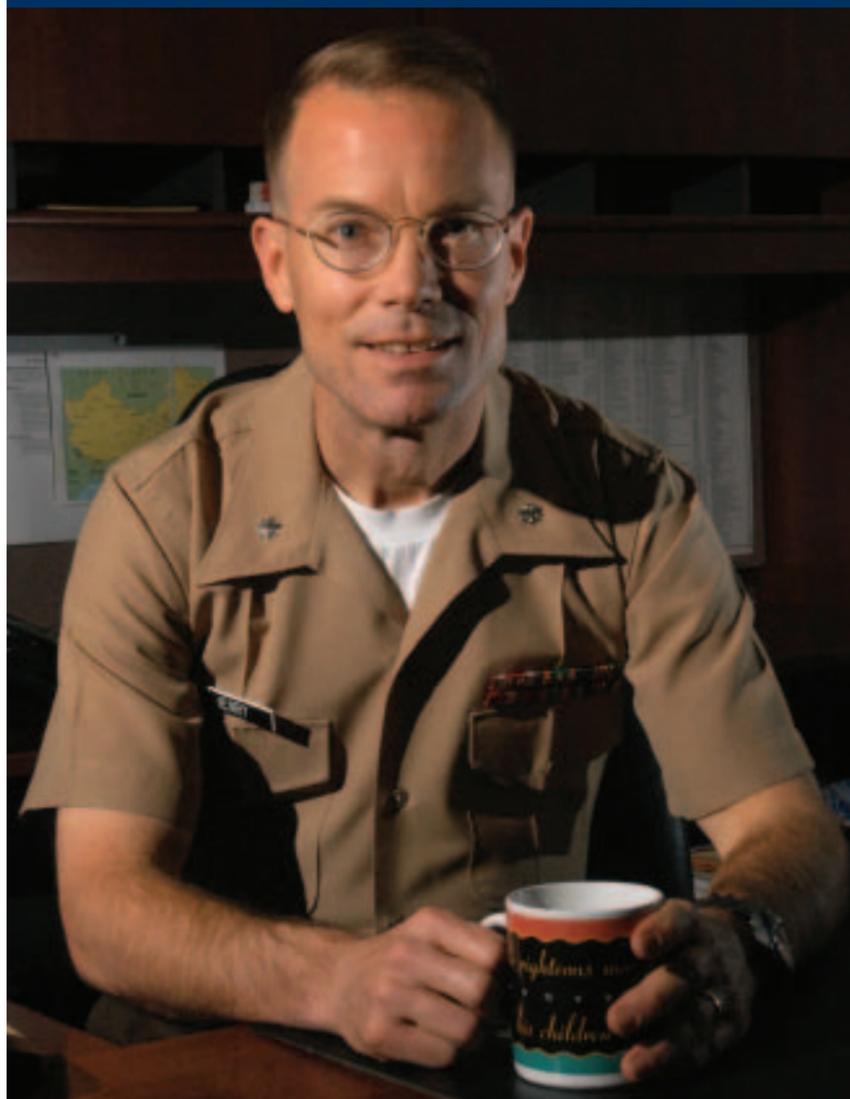
"I don't have to say anything to people who said I couldn't make it," he retorted. "I just graduated." **M**

"I think any obstacle in life can be overcome if you believe in yourself."

To China With Love

Depot Marine answers calling to spread faith in Asia

By Lance Cpl. Jess Levens,
MARINE CORPS RECRUIT DEPOT SAN DIEGO



▲ Lt. Col. Hugh A. Henry's retirement ended more than 24 years of military service but marks the beginning of a new service to God. He and his wife, Crickett, and their five children plan to move to China in April to live as missionaries.

Photo by Lance Cpl. Jess Levens

He sits at his desk tying up loose ends and doing the last of his Marine Corps duties, only stopping to sip from his Proverbs 20:7 coffee mug and reminisce over his long tenure.

Lt. Col. Hugh A. Henry, the depot's deputy assistant chief of staff, sighs with gratitude and relief. He sips, peering over his mug into a unique future with his family doing what he said is his calling in a service other than the Corps – spreading Christianity, which he plans to do in China in a couple months.

"I always had great respect for God and the Bible," said Henry, who was raised Roman Catholic in a Marine Corps family. "When I was 7 years old, a question popped into my head. 'How do I know I'll go to Heaven? Do I have to be a priest to know?'"

This question stayed with Henry and was finally answered when he was 16, living in Cherry Point, N.C.

"My friends invited me to a Billy Graham crusade," said Henry. "I was reluctant because of my loyalty to the Catholic Church, but I still had a lot of questions."

Graham's sermon made sense to him, he said, and everything started coming together. When Graham invited audience members to come to the stage and accept Jesus Christ as their savior, Henry hesitated.

"I felt it inside me, but for some reason, I wouldn't go down there," he

➤ He plans to fulfill a religious mission in China that God called him to serve, Henry said.

Photo by Staff Sgt. Scott Dunn



said. "I realized I was embarrassed to go in front of my friends, which was silly. So I swallowed my pride. I'd rather have an opportunity for a real relationship with God than look cool in front of my friends."

So Henry went to the altar where one of Graham's counselors showed Henry a pamphlet that pictured two cliffs with a valley in the middle. One cliff was labeled "God," and the other "man." Written in the valley was the word "sin." A cross lay over the valley, forming a bridge between man and God.

"That was the first time I understood how to have a personal relationship with God," said Henry.

About two years later, he was accepted to the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md. Before enrolling there, he had to complete courses at the Naval Academy Preparatory School.

"I was lonely at NAPS," said Henry. "Every night, I stayed in my room and prayed and wrote in my journal. One evening I wrote, 'I want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.' I studied the disciples closer and decided that's what I wanted. Following Him is a simple priority. All (disciples) did was follow Jesus and spread his word."

While going to a Christian conference with his study group, Henry came across a scripture that changed his life forever, Acts 20:24.

"However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the

race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace."

"That verse has guided my life for the last 28 years," said Henry.

When a friend of his left the Navy and moved to China as a missionary, he gave Henry an open invitation to join him.

"That is what I feel I was called to do," said Henry. "I knew when I was done with the Corps I was going to be a missionary."

Henry shared the idea with his wife of 14 years, Crickett, who enthusiastically agreed.

Crickett, loved the idea, she said. "I felt God put China in my heart several years ago, and it was just confirmation of God's plan for us when Hugh brought it up."

The family has been learning Chinese for about a year and a half, said Henry.

They are scheduled to leave for China in April after Henry's time on active duty is over. They will minister in the city of Guangzhou, in

Southeastern China.

"It will definitely be a culture shock, especially for the kids. We will have to adjust to a whole new way of life," Henry said.

It will also be tough moving from a normal, American house to a Chinese apartment building. But, the biggest challenge is carrying out his God-given mission in a country that isn't exactly Christian friendly.

Until they are proficient in the Chinese language, the Henrys will start their evangelism by holding Bible studies on university campuses where people speak English.

The Marine Corps had a hand in grooming him for this mission in several ways, Henry said.

"The Corps has given me discipline and perseverance to do what I need to do. It's also taught me to use compassion for those less fortunate. The core values, honor, courage and commitment, are also very important when it comes to evangelism." **M**

"I knew when I was done with the Corps I was going to be a missionary."

Mother, Marine, Now Mayor

Retired warrant officer uses Corps' values for political success

By Sgt. Matthew Scotten, KENDALLVILLE, Ind.

Once a Marine, always a Marine — every Marine is familiar with this phrase. Some would even say it is one of the things that make the Marine Corps special. SuzAnne Handshoe, a retired chief warrant officer and the city's mayor, believes in it because she lives it, breathes it, and uses it everyday in her work.

"Being mayor is a lot like being the (commanding officer) of a Marine unit," says Handshoe. "It's important to keep the morale high, but you can't be afraid to make decisions. When you come across a situation you have to make a decision and live with it."

Her "gung ho" attitude and methods have caught some people within the local community off guard, said Handshoe.

"This is the first time Kendallville has had a female mayor and some have been a little apprehensive," she said. "The biggest challenge has been making sure people don't misinterpret my actions by thinking of me as a left-wing women's rights activist. I just try to do my job as effectively and efficiently as possible."

Handshoe, the mother of a 16-year-old and a 10-year-old, decided to pursue this career because she looked around Kendallville and wasn't happy with the way things were, she said. She thought she could make things better, so, in typical Marine fashion, she got motivated and ran for office.

"It was just something I decided," said



Handshoe. "I saw a problem, saw how I could make it better, and I started working toward it."

The first time she ran for office ended in disappointment when she lost. That didn't stop her though, she ran again in the next election.

This time, when the election came around, her reserve unit was activated and facing duty in Iraq. In light of this, she was not allowed to run in the primaries.

"That made it very hard. I was able to run only after the Marine Corps wrote them a letter saying I was not going to deploy with the unit, but rather stay behind as the Casualty Assistance Officer," she said.

That setback left Handshoe with only two months to campaign.

▲ Retired Chief Warrant Officer 4 SuzAnne Handshoe compares being mayor of her city to being the commanding officer of a Marine Corps unit, as both require the ability to make decisions.

Photo by Sgt. Matthew Scotten

"The campaign required an enormous amount of discipline and motivation just to have a shot at it. I had a lot of catching up to do," said Handshoe. "In many ways I credit the Marine Corps for my success, and that was a good example of why. The Marine Corps gave me the kind of motivation it takes to succeed where others might not."

She ended up winning by 138 votes, exactly the number she was beaten by in the prior election. **M**

Lift them, click them, fuse them and then arm them—these are the steps the warriors of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 332 go through to send another F/A-18 Hornet out with a full load of 500-pound bombs Feb. 20 during Operation Southern Frontier 2004.

Although the workload is not as heavy for the aviation ordnance technicians as it has been on other deployments, the daily mission mixed with the sweltering summer heat and widely dispersed work areas are enough to keep up the level of excitement.

The deployment to Queensland not only introduces the Marines to the heat, it provides them hands-on time with the munitions they are trained to install.

Being able to apply what was learned in school to combat scenarios being executed by the pilots is what it's all about, said Pfc. Anthony Wilson, an aviation ordnance technician.

"Exercises like this are imperative, because it allows them to get the face-to-face time with the weapons that they need," said Gunnery Sgt. Rene Benedit, ordnance noncommissioned officer in charge.

Each job is broken down into many different steps to ensure precision quality. "To them it might seem simple because we break it down into a variety of tasks, but if you were to put it all on one Marine, it is a lot of work," Benedit said.

The bomb-loading crew tasks differ from day-to-day. Before going home each night, the flight schedule, detailing the specifics of the next day's flights, is published.

"Our job depends on a lot of things. Some bombs have to be wired differently," said Cpl. Sarah Robinson, reciting a long list of weights and acronyms, each representing a type of ordnance she has helped hoist and fasten to the belly of the F/A-18 countless times in her three years as a Marine. "What type of fins do they want? Do they want a mechanical fuse or a tail fuse?... It will

There's More to This Job Than Lift, Click, Fuse, Drop

By Staff Sgt. Nicholas P. McLaren, ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE BASE TOWNSVILLE, Australia



▲ Pfc. Anthony Wilson, aviation ordnance technician, installs a fuse of a 500-pound bomb.

Photo by Staff Sgt. Nicholas P. McLaren

all be on the flight schedule."

Lift, click, fuse and load is simplifying the demanding job the ordnance team performs, according to Benedit. Planning, electronic checks, weapons inspections and programming the appropriate settings are all vital to accomplish the desired end state.

The quality of the job they do is evident when steel hits the target on the bombing range.

"We actually get to load the stuff that gets dropped on the targets. There

is a lot of pressure to get everything done on time. So, it was real nice to get a chance to see what our work actually does," said Wilson of a day at the bombing range.

"We do get feedback. Sometimes the pilots will tell us what happened or even shoot video," said Wilson.

"We have outstanding crews. These Marines are on the flight line from (6 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.) in 100-degree temperatures. It is a lot of hard work," said Benedit. **M**

"In many ways, I credit the Marine Corps for my success."

New York Street Honors Marine Killed in OIF

By Gunnery Sgt. John S. Jamison Jr. & Cpl. Beth Zimmerman, NEW YORK



example to young men and women in New York," Martinez said. "...So we all remember that no matter where you were born, there's an opportunity to serve this country."

U. S. Representative Charles Rangel, (D-N.Y.) spoke on a bill that was introduced in July named after Tejada. The bill proposes that anyone put in harm's way for this country would be granted citizenship.

Tejada's commanding officer in Iraq, Maj. Michael Miller, painted a picture of Tejada's service during Operation Iraqi Freedom. "April 11th is a day that will always stay in my memory," said Miller. He described for the Washington

Heights' neighborhood the scene in the abandoned building in Iraq that Tejada and his platoon stayed in.

"I walked in and found him making tea for his Marines," said Miller. "It's remarkable how much care he had for his Marines ... and for his family and this neighborhood."

◀ At the intersection of Nicholas Avenue and 180th Street, the southwest corner of 180th Street is now Staff Sergeant Riayan Agosto Tejada Street. Tejada is a Washington Heights native, and he originally emigrated from the Dominican Republic.

Photo by Cpl. Beth Zimmerman

Miller also described the firefight the Marines encountered that same night. "A sergeant at the front of the ranks was shot," said Miller. "Despite the oncoming fire, (Tejada) charged to his aid, and just as he reached the front he was struck."

Miller said that two corpsmen and two Marines tried to save Tejada's life. "No one wanted to let their hero fall ... he was a father figure to those Marines."

His commanding officer said what most of his friends and family were already thinking. "That's (Tejada's) smile shining down on us." **M**

stay with them.

Tejada, 26, was assigned to the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, which deployed from Camp Pendleton, Calif. Tejada, an eight-year veteran of the Corps, immigrated from the Dominican Republic as a child and grew up on 180th Street in the New York neighborhood.

Community members of all ages and nationalities gathered at the intersection of 180th St. and St. Nicholas Avenue, also known as Juan Pablo Duarte Boulevard, to remember a man they called, "an American hero."

"We're here today as a united community," said City Councilman Miguel Martinez. "We want to honor his memory... so that he will continue to be an

In a solemn, yet uplifting ceremony Feb. 27 on the upper west side of Manhattan, the community of Washington Heights dedicated a street in the name of a Marine who was not yet a citizen of the United States when he was shot and killed during a firefight northeast of Baghdad, April 11, 2003.

The southwest corner of 180th Street is now known as, "Staff Sergeant Riayan Agosto Tejada Street." It is intersected by Juan Pablo Duarte Boulevard, which is named after the founder of the Dominican Republic. That one corner now simultaneously honors a Dominican and American hero. For those who knew him, it's also a way Tejada will

Marine Receives U.S. Citizenship with Aid of Illinois Lt. Gov.

By Eunice Park, CHICAGO



➤ Cpl. Matthew Prentice receives his U.S. citizenship Feb. 20. Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn and Prentice's family were present for the ceremony.

Photo courtesy of Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn's office

Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn joined British-born Cpl. Matthew Prentice for the granting of U.S. citizenship Feb. 20 before his unit, the 1st Marine Division, departs for active duty service in Iraq.

Recently, Prentice logged on to Quinn's Web site, www.operationhomefront.com, to learn more about the Illinois Military Family Relief Fund and the various ways it can help National Guard members, reservists and their families. Prentice contacted Quinn's office by sending an e-mail describing his citizenship dilemma.

"As soon as I sent my e-mail to the Lieutenant Governor's office, they immediately sent me a reply and have been working closely with me through the whole citizenship process," said Prentice. "Everyone I know says that Illinois has it

good when it comes to helping their troops and it really is true."

Prentice emigrated to the United States from England with his mother, father, two brothers and his sister in 1981 and for the last 13 years the family has lived in Illinois.

As a member of the United States Marine Corps, Prentice has already served his adopted country by deploying to Operation Dynamic Response in Kosovo, Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"This is electronic democracy at its best," said Quinn. "Corporal Prentice e-mailed our office through the military family Web site and here we are now, welcoming him as an American citizen."

Federal Judge Samuel Der-Yeghiayan, an Armenian immigrant who came to the United States when he was 19,

swore in Prentice.

Prentice's mother and father, Lindsey and John Prentice, his two brothers, Laurence and Neil and his sister, Jeni, were also present for the ceremony.

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, about 38,000 troops — or 3 percent — of U.S. troops are not citizens.

Quinn has led the successful drive to set up the Illinois Military Family Relief Fund to assist the families of Illinois National Guard member and reservists who face economic hardship when the breadwinner is on active duty.

Quinn's Web site, www.operationhomefront.org, describes how citizens back home can help the troops and their families. Having registered more than 4.6 million hits, the Web site is one of the most frequented sites in Illinois government. **M**

"No one wanted to let their hero fall ... he was a father figure to those Marines."

Vietnamese Eldest Son Finds His Own Way in Corps

By Lance Cpl. Edward R. Guevara Jr.,
MARINE CORPS RECRUIT DEPOT SAN DIEGO

Some cultures place more importance on the traditions of the culture and place more pride in family names than others.

Pfc. Hai-Nam D. Nguyen, Platoon 1143, Company D, comes from such a culture. His is a traditional Vietnamese family, which passes down family responsibility and the surname to the first-born son. As the eldest son of the eldest son, Nguyen is in line to one day become the head of the family, which means he already has more obligations to the family than the average new Marine.

"He has to be a role model for the rest of the 28 grandchildren," said Dong Nguyen, his older sister. "Nam is hard-headed and doesn't always understand how important his role is."

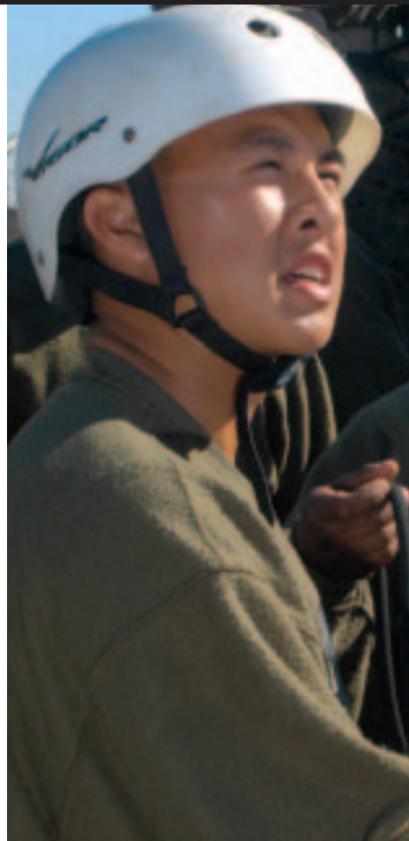
This hard-headedness comes from growing up away from Vietnam and tradition. Although his family is from Vietnam, Nguyen was born in a Philippines refugee camp and raised in the United States.

While ducking police in Vietnam during the 1980s, his family escaped to the sea, first finding themselves in Thailand and eventually making their way with pirates to the Philippines, according to Nguyen's siblings.

The police caught up with his father Buck Nguyen and took him to a political camp for months. Afterward he found his family in the Philippines and rejoined them to journey to the United States.

The family is now settled in Arlington, Texas, where Buck owns a construction business.

His father faced many hardships in order to find happiness, Nguyen said.



A Pfc. Hai-Nam D. Nguyen, Platoon 1143, Company D, prepares to descend the rappel tower at the depot.

Photo by Lance Cpl. Edward R. Guevara Jr.

This inspired Nguyen to endure the challenge of becoming a Marine.

"I wanted to be unique and show I put forth the effort to earn what I was given and to pay back the United States for the opportunities given to my family," said Nguyen.

The United States allowed his family to migrate after one of his family mem-

bers, who was an ally to the American government while in Vietnam, moved to the States and sponsored them to come over.

The United States also offered aid to Nguyen's family when they began living in America. However, they did not use it.

"My dad refused government support," he said. "He wanted to earn everything on his own."

That memory was ingrained in Nguyen's mind.

"I didn't go through the hardships (my parents) did," he said, but he wants to earn his own way like his father.

"He lived those core values of honor, courage and commitment everyday," Nguyen said, speaking about the same values instilled in Marines during recruit training.

Although Nguyen has now proven his mettle by completing recruit training, he had to receive his family's approval before joining. He wanted to join the Marine Corps out of high school, but his family forbade it.

"Most Asian families don't think outside the box," said Dong. "Everyone in the family was against it, even our parents at first."

Fortunately for Nguyen, his parents felt he could grow as a man and a role model for his family as a Marine.

"When I joined the Marine Corps (my father) told me he was proud. It brought tears to his eyes," said Nguyen. "We live as Americans and still recognize we come from Vietnam and are now Vietnamese-Americans."

Nguyen has the opportunity to combine his experience with both cultures to help move his family into the future with confidence. **M**

Denver Marine's Selfless Act Contributes to Victory

By Sgt. Matthew O. Holly,
MARINE CORPS RECRUITING STATION DENVER



< IRAQ — Lance Cpl. Brandon A. Warpness (front row, second from the left) is pictured with fellow Marines from 1st Combat Engineer Battalion, 1st Marine Division, during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Warpness was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal with combat "V" device for his actions during the war.

Photo courtesy of Lance Cpl. Brandon A. Warpness

ing year in July after attending Laramie High School.

"I was scared and proud at the same time," stated Marci Warpness, Brandon's mother, when speaking of her son's decision to join the Marine Corps. "Joining the Marine Corps afforded him the opportunity to see different parts of the world."

When Marci asked her son if he regretted joining the Corps, he replied, "No, Mom, I don't. I wanted to see the world, that was my goal and I've certainly done that."

"I've driven from ocean to ocean and been up and down both seaboard; I've been to four different countries, and met a lot of nice people along the way," explained Warpness. "I've done all of this in just two years."

"When he returned home, the difference in him was beyond description," explained Marci. "He and his father, a former Marine, stand the same way and the only way to describe it would be to say that they stand tall and proud."

"The best way I can sum up my short time in the Marine Corps is to say that I've had a lot of fun and seen a lot of places," said Warpness.

When asked about returning to Iraq, Warpness stated he has had plenty of time to get himself and his family ready for his next deployment if he is called upon. **M**

When the Marine Corps turned its attention toward the Global War on Terrorism, few would have thought that a small-town Marine with dreams of seeing the world would return home as a combat veteran, decorated for his combat heroism.

Lance Cpl. Brandon A. Warpness, 1st Combat Engineer Battalion, Regimental Combat Team 7, 1st Marine Division, while serving as assistant machine gunner, was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal, with combat "V" device denoting valor for his actions during Operation Iraqi Freedom, April 7.

After coming up to a minefield on the west side of the Diyala River, which hindered the advance of 1st Tank Battalion's offensive on Baghdad, a mine-clearing charge was detonated to clear the ground. The minefield, however, remained a daunting 150-meter hurdle of anti-tank mines and grenades rigged as anti-personnel mines for the advance.

Abandoning the safety of his amphibious assault vehicle, Warpness ran 120-meters down the middle of the minefield, ignoring the danger of enemy rocket-propelled grenades and machinegun fire, and placed a bangalore torpedo into the remaining minefield to clear a path.

The certificate signed by Maj. Gen. James N. Mattis, commanding general, 1st Marine Division, awarded to Warpness, who was a private first class at the time, stated that the act of valor was "instrumental in breaching the obstacle. His initiative, perseverance and total dedication to duty reflected great credit upon himself and were in keeping with highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval services."

"I think my overall experience in Iraq was a good experience," said Warpness. "I learned to appreciate this great country more than before."

Warpness signed up in the Marine delayed entry program, Dec. 16, 2000, and proceeded to boot camp the follow-

"He and his father, a former Marine, stand the same way ... tall and proud."

New Marine Gains Discipline, Loses Weight

By Sgt. David Salazar, FORT PIERCE, Fla.

➤ Pfc. Jesus Vega, a Marine currently on Permissive Recruiter Assistance Program orders at Recruiting Substation Fort Pierce, holds a picture of himself at 305 pounds—his weight just prior to expressing his interest in joining the Corps.

Photo by Sgt. David Salazar

The change is forever” is a recruiting slogan that has special meaning for Pfc. Jesus Vega.

He breathed new life into the Corps’ old motto by transforming his 5-foot, 11-inch tall, 305-pound body into a lean, mean, fighting machine of 188 pounds. The yearlong journey that took the 20-year-old, 2001 graduate of South Fork High School from hefty to healthy began in January 2003.

Having participated in Army Reserve Officer Training Corps activities during high school, Vega approached the local Army recruiter for information on joining only to find his knock on that door of opportunity would go unanswered.

“I wanted to get more information and see if I could join the Army, but they wouldn’t give me the time of day,” Vega recalled. “I knew the Marine Corps had tough weight restrictions, so I hadn’t thought about going to them, but the Army recruiter told me that I should.

“Then I thought, ‘Well they are the toughest’, and that’s what I wanted, so I went down to talk to Staff Sgt. (Joshua) Nesselhauf.”

Though he initially had reservations of his own, Nesselhauf, the canvassing recruiter assigned to Permanent Contact Station Jensen Beach, gave the then-heavy Vega two hours of his time.

Nesselhauf made it very clear that in his present state, Vega was not qualified to join the Corps. So the two made a deal: if Vega could drop 15-20 pounds



in a few months, Nesselhauf would invest more time in helping him get into shape, and more importantly, help him attain his goal of losing close to 100 pounds to meet the requirement to join the Delayed Entry Program.

Vega didn’t take that gamble lightly. “That was a big wake up call for me,” confessed the Stuart, Fla, native. “But I knew I had to do it. I talked to my girlfriend that night and told her: ‘I’ve got to get out of here. I have to make a better life for myself.’”

Then Vega, a self-proclaimed couch potato at the time, took matters into his own hands and began to run regularly and cut fast food out of his diet.

In one month’s time, a 274-pound Vega returned to PCS Jensen Beach for a follow up with Nesselhauf.

“I was shocked,” Nesselhauf said. But the gesture showed Vega was worth the recruiter’s time.

“The fact that he put forth all of that effort to lose that amount of weight so quickly showed me he was serious about

his goals, so I invited him out to our pool meetings and invited him to come PT with us,” Nesselhauf said.

Within eight months of his initial visit, Vega had shed 96 pounds and joined the Marine DEP.

“He was almost in tears,” recalled Staff Sgt. Ric Wagner, RSS Fort Pierce’s staff noncommissioned officer-in-charge.

Then Vega lost an additional 17 pounds to make his shipping weight requirement and hit the renowned yellow footprints at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island Nov. 3, 2003. He graduated boot camp on Jan. 30 as a squad leader.

The new Marine returned to PCS Jensen Beach one more time in an effort to perpetuate motivation among men and women in his former situation.

“All I want to do is inspire someone,” Vega said. “I want to make a difference in someone that’s heavy and tell them that life isn’t about sitting around and having things handed to you, you have to get up and make those changes on your own. **M**

Marine Takes Aim, Hits Her Goal

By Lance Cpl. Heidi Loreda, MARINE CORPS AIR GROUND COMBAT CENTER TWENTYNINE PALMS, Calif.



◀ Sgt. Sherry D. Williams is the only female precision weapons repairer in the Marine Corps. Williams underwent three years of on the job training at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., before being stationed in Twentynine Palms.

Photo by Lance Cpl. Heidi E. Loreda

my 11th-grade summer, but I got there late. I spent two days in Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. I even got all my shots. They sent me back because I didn’t have enough time to complete boot camp and go back to school.”

Williams, a Brooklyn, N.Y., native, waited a whole year for her recruiter to fix her paperwork but nothing was accomplished.

When her plans to enlist in the Army fell through, Williams enrolled at Long Island University in Brooklyn for six months to study pharmacy. However, she was not ready to settle down.

“I went to the mall one day, and I saw a Marine recruiter,” said 27-year-old Williams. “I started talking to him, and I told him if he got me out of there in two weeks I’d go”

She joined the Marine Corps on an open contract, but was pleased with the job fate handed her. “When I got to [Marine Combat Training] I found out I was going to be an armorer. I really was happy with that. That wasn’t my MOS by choice, it was just open contract, and the Corps gave it to me.”

Her parents, Guyana natives, were at first disbelieving and unconvinced of their daughter’s decision to enlist

“At first my mom, who was in the National Guard, hated the fact that I wanted to be in the service,” said Williams, who plans on retiring from the Corps. “My father was kind of scared. Before even thinking about joining the service, my fingernails didn’t get dirty at all. If I went to the store my hair had to be in place. And there I was. I was joining the service.”

After completing training, Williams’ first duty station as an armorer was in

Okinawa, Japan, with Combat Assault Battalion, Combat Engineer Company. During her tour she talked to gunsmiths and grew more interested in their work.

“I kept talking to them,” said Williams. “At the time there were no females in the MOS at all. I wanted to be the first one but two other females beat me to it.”

Her chance came while at Cherry Point, N.C., with Marine Aircraft Group 28 where her re-enlistment option was to go to Weapons Training Bn.’s Precision Weapons Section, Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., for three years of on-the-job training.

The gunsmith training facility is the only shop of its kind anywhere in the Department of Defense. The PWS supports the Marine Corps’ Competition-in-Arms Program as well as the Fleet Marine Force by building and maintaining a variety of precision rifles and pistols including the MEU SOC .45-caliber pistol, National Match M-9 9mm pistol, National Match M-16A2 rifle, Designated Marksman Rifle, and the M-40A3 sniper rifle. PWS also offers an 18-month training course through which Marine armorers gain the additional military occupational specialty, precision weapons armorer.

“I love what I do,” said Williams. “Now I’ve started shooting in competitions. It’s helping me not only in building (weapons), I also get to see how the weapons work. To see a gun operate the way it’s supposed to, I feel proud.

“Someone may have a weapon I built, like the sniper rifles in Iraq, and it may make a difference between life and death. It may save someone’s life,” she said.

Williams offers advice to any Marine who wants to break barriers.

“They have to have the drive,” said Williams, with a determined look on her delicate face. It’s not easy. It’s challenging, especially if you’re going to be the only female or the odd number. But if you’re professional, it doesn’t matter. Be professional, take the job seriously, stay fit and have a good mental attitude.” **M**